The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

The following letter from a trustworthy source gives a vivid picture of events and the state of opinion in France and, in particular, an account of the new stirrings among youth:

CONDITIONS IN FRANCE

" The sudden collapse of the French nation was as much of an unforeseen shock to the French as to anyone outside. Men whom we know well who have lived these ten awful days of flight, where millions of civilians covered the roads all mixed up with the retiring army, have come back *old* men—broken. This is especially true of men who had fought the two wars. How could such a change have taken place in the spirit of a nation in twenty years? All thoughtful Frenchmen are sadly clear that what they witnessed during this month of June was not first and foremost a military defeat—such a defeat might have been faced and overcome—but rather the breakdown of the whole framework without which no nation can live, no order can be maintained.

" The first thing a foreigner asks from a Frenchmen to-day is: Are you for Pétain or for de Gaulle? To most Frenchmen this question seems irrelevant—an academic debate. In saying that it is irrelevant we mean two things. First, it is no concrete dilemma because, while a few men could manage to leave France in the early days of the armistice, this had soon become impossible; secondly, because the real and live issue for all Frenchmen is to make the best of the concrete and unavoidable situation in which they find themselves *to-day*.

"It is easy to criticize Marshal Pétain; he has at least preserved some kind of order and saved France from complete chaos. The great majority of the French people are thankful to him for having attempted to save whatever could be saved under the circumstances. They believe if he had gone things would have been still worse. That his freedom of action is very limited is a secret for no one. That he may be overthrown any time and another more docile leader, in sympathy with the Nazi system, may be forced upon the country is no secret either. This is why there is no outspoken opposition; any change could only be for the worse. But even if he did not last, he would have given France a respite, a breathing space, during which some State order has been restored, and people have been given time to recover their spirits and rethink their position.

" If we want to recover at all as a nation we must first of all recover our soul. The downfall of a nation nearly always has its roots in inward deficiencies rather than in outward circumstances. Elementary qualities of courage, self-sacrifice, professional loyalty have been lacking; men have run away from their appointed duty in order to save their lives; and this is as true, perhaps more true, of officials in high positions as of the rank and file. Those who know French history are sadly aware that this is something new, contrary to our best national tradition.

" Are we paying the price of being to a large extent a dechristianized nation? And a nation where the old slogans of liberty, democracy had lost much of their content and of their driving power? The interesting and encouraging fact is that so many people now are aware that something was wrong and rotten; that we must start anew, even at the cost of much hardship and suffering, if we are to recover at all.

" There is genuine scorn against the leaders who are held responsible for the collapse. The man-in-the-street feels he has been fooled but he does not know exactly by whom. Official propaganda puts the blame on the Front Populaire, on the Freemasons and the Jews, on Britain. There is something desperately sad in a hopeless situation when the various groups in the nation start accusing each other. It is here that the Christian Church has a strong word to say; and its leaders have reminded the people from the first that we should all put ourselves together under the judgment of God rather than start the deadly game of blaming others.

" On the whole French people always listen with a sceptical ear to official propaganda, they want to know the other side of things. There certainly has been for a while a wave of anti-British feeling. As time passes, nevertheless, and the German occupation weighs more and more heavily on the people, all sensible men become aware that British victory is the only hope of freedom left, and await that victory with ardent and hopeful expectations. To give a complete picture of the situation it must be said, nevertheless, that there is at least one group which believes that the future of France lies in a close co-operation with Germany; the P.S.F. (Parti-Social Français), headed by Doriot, stands for some French edition of the National Socialist regime. Certain measures taken by the French Government can only be understood if one remembers the constant pressure exerted on it and the danger of a much more radical group coming into power. The greatest matter of concern lies in the measures taken against the Jews and against the foreigners—nothing goes more against the French tradition. As we write, the content of these new decrees is not fully known; still less the way in which they will be applied. The fact that all Jews living in Alsace-Lorraine have been forced to leave by the German authorities, that most Jews living in the occupied zone have moved into the free zone, creates a real Jewish problem in Southern France (free zone) where there never had been any Jewish problem at all. Most foreigners have also moved south; which means that the Midi has to go on providing food and shelter for millions of refugees, including the Frenchmen who are not allowed back into the "forbidden zone" (the northern and eastern part of the occupied area), and all those other than Jews who have been ousted from Alsace and Lorraine. All this means a terrible crisis of unemployment.

" The greatest difficulty for the French Government lies in the fact that the country has been cut in two. Since two months there has been scarcely any postal communication between the two zones and while large categories of refugees have been allowed back to the occupied zone, this " wall " creates both an administrative and psychological problem of such magnitude that some people have come to believe that even total occupation would be less of an evil.

" One of the most important features of the Vichy government is its interest in youth. Here again, many people have been wrongly apprehensive, fearing some kind of totalitarian movement. This is definitely not the case. Everything might change to the worse of course if, for instance, the Doriot party came to power or succeeded in making its influence felt in youth circles. At the present moment existing youth movements are entirely free to go on with their work provided they comply with certain requirements. And these requirements are not of an ideological kind; they bear mainly on physical training. All young people are to undergo an intensive physical and civic training. This training will be given in school or in the " Maisons de la Jeunesse " which are to exist in each town or village. Youth movements are allowed to provide the training themselves if they are adequately equipped, and can use the " Maisons de la Jeunesse " for that purpose. A Charter of Youth specifies the requirements imposed on movements which ask for State recognition. They must be movements organised on a national scale with responsible leaders, nationally, regionally and locally. Christian activity is not only unchanged but encouraged. A new movement, *Compagnons de France*, has been started; it has been initiated by a former Scout of France with the aim of organising the youth of France which does not yet belong to any organisation. It is estimated that six-sevenths of French youth are unorganised. The group which launches the new movement is composed of young men who nearly all have gained their experience in some of the

existing youth movements. The spirit of this new movement seems very much akin to that of the Scouts, while the technique is not the same. Emphasis is laid on loyalty to family and country, on hard and daring living; special work centres (*chantiers*) will be provided for the young unemployed. The *Compagnons de France* take the boys from the age of 16 to 20.

" All young men of 20-21 are compelled to spend six months in government labour camps. The Government has asked both the Catholic and the Protestant Church to provide chaplains for these camps; they will receive government pay and share in the life of the camps. Catholic organisations have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into these new movements and provided a great part of the leadership for the *Compagnons*. Protestant organisations find it more difficult to cope with the situation, as they do not have enough leaders to run their own movements. Yet some of the best Protestant leaders have shared in the launching of the *Compagnons*.

" These new developments raise a good deal of enthusiasm among young people. While the older generations suffer under a deep sense either of guilt or of frustration, the young turn with youthful eagerness to the task of reconstruction. They were not very keen about the old order which has now collapsed; they think it was pretty rotten. They are not quite aware yet of all that is involved in national defeat. They have little sense of personal guilt. They turn to the future; they feel challenged rather than depressed by the harder kind of life they will now have to live. The whole atmosphere of these youth circles acts on one like a tonic. One begins to feel that there is still life in France, and faith; and therefore real possibilities of national recovery."

THE NATION AND RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

The experience both of evacuation and of the religious condition of the youth of the nation serving in the armed forces has brought home the widespread, almost complete ignorance both of what Christianity is and of the historic facts on which it rests. Opinion has been roused to seek a remedy for this state of things. Reform can come about only if two conditions are fulfilled. The first is that the Churches should agree on a policy; the education authorities must necessarily be hesitant until the matter is removed from the sphere of controversy. Secondly, reform can be brought about only with the goodwill of the parents. The Bishop of Winchester in his diocesan leaflet has made a stirring appeal emphasising both these points. It is essential also to obtain the goodwill and hearty co-operation of the body of teachers.

The present situation is discussed by Dr. Scott Lidgett in an article entitled " Education: an Urgent Task " in the *Contemporary Review* for January. I have also had a good many letters on the subject in recent weeks. In these the following points are emphasised. The first four are taken from Dr. Scott Lidgett's article, the next three are from a letter from the Archbishop of York and the important last point has been urged by the Bishop of Liverpool.

(1) Universal religious instruction and worship in schools should be guaranteed.

(2) Committees of administrators, teachers, clergy and ministers should be charged by every Local Education Authority with the task both of preparing and of supervising religious instruction.

(3) Especially in secondary schools, but not exclusively in them, teachers specially trained to give religious instruction should be appointed.

(4) The use of the Anson by-law, which provides for the withdrawal of scholars at the request of their parents on stated days to attend instruction in churches, should not merely be tolerated but encouraged and brought into general operation.

(An interesting scheme on these lines has been worked out in the York diocese.)[1]

(5) The present Act should be amended to permit of religious instruction being given at any hour. This would allow a specialist to give religious instruction right through the school.

[1]See *Some Suggestions with regard to the Use of Section 13 of the Education Act, 1932*; Central Council of the Church for Religious Education, 69 Great Peter Street, London, S.W.1.

(6) Religious knowledge should be included among the optional subjects for the Joint Board Teachers Certificate, and religious instruction should, equally with other subjects, be inspected by H.M. Inspectors, or persons specially appointed for the purpose.

(7) The agreed syllabus should be used in all schools with a special supplement for use in denominational schools.

(8) Much controversy would be eliminated and a large measure of agreement would be more quickly reached if, instead of envisaging the question in terms of a mature Christian faith, a new approach were made by asking in the light of modern educational and psychological knowledge what religious teaching the child or adolescent requires, and can assimilate, at various stages of his growth.

What has been said in the preceding paragraphs relates to religious instruction, which is to be distinguished from the much wider task of religious education. Both from the religious and the educational point of view it is a matter of the first importance that a national effort should be made to remove the prevailing ignorance of Christianity and of the Bible. We have to isolate our tasks in order to pursue them effectively and this task in itself demands an immense amount of devotion and energy. But even if we were to succeed in it beyond all our expectations, conditions might remain from the religious point of view no better than before, so long as the teaching given in the religious lesson is contradicted by the prevailing practice of society and by life as it has actually to be lived. In that case Christianity is bound to seem something unreal and the minds of men may for that reason be more than ever firmly closed against it. The effort for a great extension and improvement of religious instruction will achieve its end only if it is part of a larger effort directed (in the phrase used last week) to " the re-ordering of all the elements of human life and civilisation by the power of the Spirit."

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Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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